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### The Proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacraments

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THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL  
IN WORD AND SACRAMENTS

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Practical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

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by  
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May 1988

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The most outlandish false teacher is the one who claims to be the Anointed One of God. Jesus Christ warned His followers that the imitators would come.<sup>1</sup> He also issued strong warnings regarding false prophets who come "in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."<sup>2</sup> A survey of Christian history demonstrates that the warnings were warranted. "Evangelists" and "ministers" who are discovered to be money-loving, self-indulging, ambitious and evil are not peculiar to any age. They have been the perpetual by-product of the orthodox faith. Paul cautions Timothy to avoid such men who "oppose the truth, men of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith."<sup>3</sup> Into this narrow definition of false teachers many notorious individuals and sects should be placed. The Augsburg Confession, for example, indicts the Manichaeans for their dualism; the Pelagians for their false teaching on original sin; and the Arians for their heretical view regarding the divine nature of Jesus. Latter

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<sup>1</sup>Matt. 24:4-5, 24; Mark 13:22. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup>Matt. 7:15; check also Deut. 13:1-3; Jer. 23:16; Matt. 24:11; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 1 John 4:1.

<sup>3</sup>2 Tim. 3:2-9; check also Rom. 16:17-18; Eph. 5:6; Col. 2:8.

day heresies found in the doctrines of the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, and the Unification Church are newer links in the continuous chain of false teachings. The leaders who bring in false doctrines and who use their "churches" for personal gain are those heretics who stand outside the boundaries of the Christian faith and yet strive to imitate it.

This study, however, combats false teachers and teachings which are found under a broader definition. They do not attempt to lead people away from the truth--their transgression is that they fail to lead them into it. They are not of necessity money-lovers, ambitious, or self-serving--on the contrary, they may be self-denying. They, like the evil teachers, have always been present wherever and whenever the Christian faith is established--but their false teaching is not regarded as anti-christian. In reference to this breed of false teacher Paul told Timothy that they desire to be teachers of the law "without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions."<sup>4</sup> They are the ones who stand within the boundaries of revealed truth and yet do not direct themselves or their followers to the heart of the Christian faith, the specific Gospel of Jesus Christ.

An example of this type of false teacher is discovered in the remarks of Martin Luther regarding Francis of Assisi:

I do not think that Francis was an evil man; but the facts prove that he was naive or, to state it more truthfully,

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<sup>4</sup>1 Tim. 3:2-9; check also 1 Tim. 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:14, 16; Titus 1:14, 3:9.

foolish. He establishes the law or rule that his followers should live according to the Gospel. But he maintained that it is the most perfect rule of the Gospel to sell everything and give it to the poor.<sup>5</sup>

Luther's observations about Francis fit the pattern of unsound teaching in the wider sense. Francis was not evil. He did not seek the destruction of divine truth. He was a false teacher, however, because he misinterpreted and did not present the true heart of the Gospel. Luther states that Francis did not see that "the Gospel gives us instruction about greater things, namely, that we should acknowledge our sins and hope for forgiveness of sins through the merits of Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Modern examples of such false teaching abound. It is found in the saccharized psychology/philosophy of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuler. It is in the synergistic proclamations of Reformed evangelists and preachers. It is spewing forth at an alarming rate from modern Roman Catholicism. And these added together only indicate the tip of an iceberg. They are only part of the army of well-intentioned (to put the best construction on it) but misguided teachers whose messages are to varying degrees out of synchronization with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They should not be categorized as evil. On the other hand, the seriousness of the situation should not be minimized. It is one thing to lead

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<sup>5</sup> Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jarislav Pelikan, vol. 2, Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14, trans. George V. Schick (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 327.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

people deliberately away from Christ and quite another never to lead them directly to Him, but the results can be identically tragic.

My own subconscious serves as my first critic and asks, "Are you claiming they are not Christians?" I am claiming no such thing. The fact, however, that they can be Christian does not equal the assertion that they are free to preach falsely. Nor does it allow me to keep silent about their errors. On the contrary, the fact that they are brethren is the very thing that should compel me to address their false teaching and bring them into the one mind of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

It is the serious business of this thesis to direct the accusation of false teaching (in the wider sense) closer to home. Within the ranks of the clergy of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, there are many preachers who are false, not in the manner of having evil intent, but in the manner of not making the pure and true Gospel the dominating characteristic of their proclamations.

As a parish pastor I know the difficulties of preaching the Gospel. I must constantly remind myself that the Gospel is paramount. Any sermon I have prepared without that fact in mind has degenerated into something other than the Gospel. I have on many occasions delivered (as an actor) sermons of Martin Luther and Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther. Frequently, after these performances, pastors and laypeople have commented

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<sup>7</sup>1 Cor. 1:10.

that contemporary preaching leaves something to be desired. This something, I believe, is the Gospel--not confused with or commingled with the Law; not assimilated into "get rich quick, feel better now" theology; not transformed into psychological analysis or philosophic observations; not forced to be a social or political statement; but pure and unadulterated Gospel.

The burden of this thesis is to demonstrate that when the Gospel is preached properly preaching functions as a means of divine grace. Furthermore, not only can preaching be a means of grace, but it should be.

In defense of this thesis consideration will be given to the means of grace in total (Word and Sacrament) and how they (or the Church) cannot exist apart from the pure Gospel. This study will also give attention to the specific nature and content of the Gospel, which is God's proper work among us, so that the gospels of men may be seen in the light of the true Word of grace. Both the purpose and function of the Gospel are to confer forgiveness of sins and strengthen faith--and only the Gospel can fulfill that purpose and function. It will be shown, therefore, that if a preacher wants to be an instrument through which God may save men, then he must preach to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These facts are loyal to and derived from the teaching of Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

The works of Martin Luther have been given major consideration in this study not only because of his relationship to



Lutheranism, but because among the chief issues he dealt with were the means of grace and the preaching of the Gospel. There is no one who has done more to re-establish the authority of the Gospel than this man with whom we are identified.

From among the other theologians, Martin Chemnitz and C. F. W. Walther have been chosen to support the facts of this study because of the former's influence as the stabilizer and systematician of orthodox Lutheran doctrine and the latter's concern with the proper preaching of the Gospel as manifested in his monumental lectures on the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

Other Lutheran theologians will be cited, but the purpose of this study will be fulfilled without mentioning or quoting all of the major Lutheran writers, regardless of their prowess. It is also beyond the scope and purpose of this study to recite the formal (or informal) positions of other Christian denominations in regard to the Gospel and its proclamation even though general observations may be made of trends in preaching.

This effort is not simply the fulfillment of an academic requirement. It is the result of a personal search and it addresses a personal distress. It is unsettling to realize that one may be teaching falsely (if not continually, then occasionally). The first tendency may be to soften the terminology. Must it be called "false teaching?" Must we put ourselves in the same orbit with those infamous heretics who are so meticulously anathematized in the Confessions? Though

it may be more painful, it will better serve its purpose if the charge is not diluted with pampering euphemisms. And what is the purpose of the charge? To wake up those who are asleep and redirect the energy of their preaching to the Gospel so that God's power and the means of His grace might always be present. The purpose of the charge is to remind us of the theological imperatives which inform us that the Holy Spirit has chosen to work only through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MEANS OF GRACE

The term "means of grace" is synonymous with "the Gospel and the Sacraments." Each is a definition of the other. Martin Chemnitz offers further explanation with this analogy: "That means [of grace] is, as it were, the hand of God, which He extends and opens to us, offering and presenting to us the merit and benefits of His Son for our salvation."<sup>1</sup> Here we see a significant emphasis on that word "means." The Gospel and Sacraments are not simply signs of God's grace; they are the actual means. Article V of the Augsburg Confession states it explicitly:

To obtain such faith [as would be reckoned as righteousness --Article IV] God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

In speaking of Jesus' statement, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved,"<sup>3</sup> C. F. W. Walther asserts that the

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Chemnitz, Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion, trans. Luther Poellot (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 75.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore G. Tappert, ed. & trans., The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 31.

<sup>3</sup>Mark 16:16a. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version.

statement itself ". . . produces faith in the statement and therewith communicates the blessing described. . . . I must say to myself: 'By these words God Himself imparts forgiveness of sin to me.'"<sup>4</sup> This is an example of how the means of grace operate. Paul teaches this divine principle: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

What wonders and mysteries there are to consider when explaining the means of grace. It goes beyond the simple equation that the means of grace equal the Gospel and the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit is at work through these means, conveying to man what man could not possibly bring to himself. The means of grace are intimately involved with our justification by grace. God instituted them so that justification (and therefore salvation, eternal life, et cetera) might be a reality for us. The means of grace are united to the work, death, resurrection, and ministry of intercession of Jesus Christ. Because these means continue to bestow the benefits Jesus merited, His passion and victory are not isolated in history but are efficacious truths.

God has not revealed any other means of grace than those which can be included in the Gospel and the Sacraments. This statement is not an invitation to suspect that other

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<sup>4</sup>C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 149.

<sup>5</sup>Rom. 10:17.

unrevealed means might exist. It is an affirmation that the Holy Spirit has chosen to work through these external means and minister to us mediately. What does this mean? Walther states the facts positively, "The Word produces faith, brings us forgiveness of sins, and gives us the grace of God and salvation. Baptism does the same; so does the Lord's Supper."<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther states the case negatively (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII), "In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before."<sup>7</sup> And later, in the same Article, Luther states, "Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and Sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil."<sup>8</sup>

As regards the Gospel, Paul calls it "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith."<sup>9</sup> The message of the Gospel is that the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ has taken away our sin and that He has given to us His righteousness, a heavenly home and all other blessings of His love. Baptism and the Lord's Supper ". . . are means of grace only for the

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<sup>6</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 358.

<sup>7</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 312.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 313.

<sup>9</sup>Rom. 1:16; see also 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 1:21, 15:2; Acts 11:14.

reason that a divine promise has been attached to an external symbol."<sup>10</sup> God could have attached the Gospel promise to circumcision, a symbolic tattoo or piece of jewelry, or any other external thing. But He did not. He has bonded His promise to Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar and has instituted them, along with the Gospel, as the means whereby His Spirit works salvation.

It is true that these various modes of the means of grace work differently, but they are all united to and all proclaim the same Gospel of Jesus Christ. They all provide, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the same blessings of salvation. Hermann Sasse writes:

Both the Gospel that is preached and the Gospel that occurs in the Sacrament contain one and the same gift, though in different forms: the forgiveness of sins, not an illustration of such a possibility, but the actual forgiveness itself, this unfathomable miracle of God's mercy that blots out our guilt and gives us everything that comes with forgiveness: life and salvation, redemption of the whole person, both soul and body. Both the Gospel and the Sacrament bring this forgiveness, for in both the Lamb of God who died for the sin of the world is present.<sup>11</sup>

It must be clearly understood that there is no bestowal of divine grace apart from these particular means. No acts or services instituted by men can supplant these acts and services ordained by God. Neither can the message of the Law (which is God's Word) nor the works it may inspire in men succeed in

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<sup>10</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 346.

<sup>11</sup>Hermann Sasse, We Confess the Sacraments: We Confess Series, Vol. 2, trans. Norman Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 26.

bringing to men the cleansing Word of God's grace. Therefore, when the term "Word" is used in relation to the means of grace, it refers specifically to the Gospel and not to the Scriptures as a whole. In order to distinguish properly between the two chief doctrines contained in the divine revelation, it is necessary to distinguish the Gospel in its narrow sense from "the Bible." The Scriptures contain this Gospel, but it would be a false impression if an individual thought that every passage in the Scriptures was Gospel. In dealing with the works of the seventeenth-century Lutheran theologians, Robert Preus points out, "It is the conviction of all the dogmaticians that only the Gospel, properly speaking, is a means of grace. They often speak generally of the Word being a means of grace, but they mean the Gospel."<sup>12</sup> And they mean the Gospel in its narrow sense. In the next chapter more will be written concerning this important distinction between Law and Gospel. What concerns us now is that it is the Gospel alone, even when the term "Word" is used, that is involved when discussing and applying the means of grace. Therefore, when Walther states, "The Word is a distributing and appropriating instrument of grace;"<sup>13</sup> one must understand "Word" in this context to refer specifically to the Gospel in the narrow sense.

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<sup>12</sup>Robert Preus, The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1957; reprint, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 191 (page reference is to reprint edition).

<sup>13</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 150.

This is no criticism of any theologian who uses the phrase "Word and Sacraments" as opposed to "Gospel and Sacraments." In Article V of the Augsburg Confession the German version is translated "Gospel and the sacraments" while the Latin is rendered "Word and the sacraments."<sup>14</sup> "Gospel" in its wide sense can encompass the entire revelation of God and is the equal of the broad use of the term "Word." But when defining God's work of grace and the means through which He brings it to men the focus of these words is narrow and excludes all but the message of reconciliation through Christ. "Word" and "Gospel" may be used interchangeably. But their narrow sense may never be exchanged for a broader interpretation in this context.

The application of the Gospel as the gracious and saving Word may come in a variety of forms. The most conspicuous should be its public proclamation--but it must be conceded that much of the public proclamation of the "Gospel" or the "Word" does not fit into the narrow definition. It is no exaggeration to say there are many Christian congregations which could not survive if they depended solely on their preachers to give them the gracious Word of God. What a sad commentary regarding our pulpits. What a horrible condition when a church receives its Gospel inadvertently and not through the deliberate efforts of its preacher. When preaching is on the mark, however, and works toward the proper proclamation of the Gospel

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<sup>14</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 31.



and an efficient proclamation of the Law, then such preaching is a means of divine grace. And it is such because of the Gospel it contains.

And this same Gospel functions as a means of grace when it is read in the Scriptures. This is true whether it is read privately or publicly. The Lutheran liturgy is programmed with specific pronouncements of the Gospel. Among these are such sacramental acts as the absolution of the penitents, the words of institution, the dismissal of communicants, the Baptismal formula, and the benediction. Some of the sacrificial elements of worship may also contain the narrow Gospel and thereby function as a means of grace within the congregation. Examples of these include: appropriate phrases in liturgical hymns, such as the "Gloria in Excelsis" and the "Agnus Dei"; appropriate phrases in public prayers, such as are frequently found in the basis for petition in the collects and the proper prefaces; and appropriate sections of the creeds. Also, many of the hymns used in our congregations contain the specific Gospel. When Christians comfort each other with the Gospel, it remains as effective a means of grace as when employed in more formal settings. Peter Brunner writes:

The intracongregational proclamation of the Gospel is the continuation of the Gospel's proclamation to the world. Therefore this proclamation of the Word also partakes of the promises of power and authority vouchsafed in the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Peter Brunner, Worship in the Name of Jesus, trans. M. H. Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 142.

All this teaches us that since God's Spirit has willed to be active in the Gospel, He is active when and where the Gospel is spoken, sung, read, and preached. Robert Preus comments, "Now we consider the reason why, according to all the orthodox Lutheran theologians, the Word of God is powerful. There is a perpetual union of the Spirit and the Word."<sup>16</sup>

This union between the Holy Spirit and the Gospel is what gives this particular Word its power. It is never the power of the individual who speaks the Word. Nor is the power of the Word itself. When the energy is traced back to its source one will not find a human being nor the Word alone--what will be discovered is the Holy Spirit. When conversion takes place, for example, through the preaching of the Gospel, it is not the man who preached the message who converts the listener. Nor is it the message in and of itself that has done the work. It is God the Holy Spirit who has converted and who alone has the power to convert. He does so through the Gospel, which is why the Gospel is referred to as a "means" of grace. God alone is the source and power of the grace.

This information is useful as well when dealing with the Sacraments. Physical elements are used in the Sacraments. This is the main difference between the Sacraments and the audible Gospel. It is not the water of Baptism nor the elements of the Sacrament of the Altar, however, which give them their power. The Sacraments are nothing apart from the

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<sup>16</sup>Preus, The Inspiration of the Scripture, 183.

Gospel and the Gospel, as has been stated, is the means through which the Spirit of God has deigned to operate. In his Large Catechism, Luther instructs, "We constantly teach that the sacraments and all the external things ordained and instituted by God should be regarded not according to the gross, external mask . . . but as that in which God's Word is enclosed."<sup>17</sup>

The great and necessary similarity between the Word and the Sacraments is the Word. The Gospel may stand alone and be an effective means of grace, but the Sacraments may not remain means of grace without the Gospel. On this basis Walther could claim, "the lustrous star that shines out of the Sacraments is the Word."<sup>18</sup>

In reference first to Baptism, Luther states:

I therefore admonish you again that these two, the Word and the water, must by no means be separated from each other. For where the Word is separated from the water, the water is no different from that which the maid cooks with and could indeed be called a bathkeeper's baptism. But when the Word is present according to God's ordinance, Baptism is a sacrament, and it is called Christ's Baptism.<sup>19</sup>

Luther, later in the Large Catechism, turns his attention to the Sacrament of the Altar. The same principle applies in reference to the bread and wine of this Sacrament as applied to the water of Baptism. Without the Word it is simply bread and wine being fed to the people. Luther writes, "It is the Word, I maintain, which distinguishes it [the Sacrament] from mere

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<sup>17</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 438.

<sup>18</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 354.

<sup>19</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 439.

bread and wine and constitutes it a sacrament which is rightly called Christ's body and blood."<sup>20</sup>

Because of the necessity and efficacy of the Word in relation to the Sacraments, they may be properly thought of as proclamation even though there is the additional emphasis of the physical elements. Indeed, the physical elements enhance and participate in the proclamation (as long as they are associated with the Word). Therefore, Paul writes in reference to the Sacrament of the Altar, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he come" (emphasis mine).<sup>21</sup> Although there is no comparable Scripture citation referring to the administering of baptismal water as proclamation, it may be legitimately inferred since the physical activity signifies what the Word promises.

If the elements of the Sacraments were used alone they could at best be regarded as mere signs. But because of the Word they are not mere signs. Those who contend that they are signs alone do so at the expense of the Gospel and in disregard to the Scriptures. The New Testament never refers to the Sacraments as signs but ascribes to them their full power as means of grace. Therefore, Sasse observes:

Where Baptism is rightly taught, there the Gospel is rightly proclaimed, for the whole Gospel is contained in this sacrament: Christ's death and resurrection, our dying and rising with Him in repentance and faith, the bestowal already now of future heavenly treasures, eternal

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Cor. 11:26.

righteousness, innocence and blessedness. The same applies to the Sacrament of the Altar.<sup>22</sup>

As means of divine grace which receive their power and blessings from God, the Word and Sacraments are effective by virtue of their source of authority and not by the faith or goodness of the men who administer them. The Augsburg Confession states this clearly in the eighth article: "Both the sacraments and the Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ even if they are administered by evil men."<sup>23</sup> This fact emphasizes God and His authority even as it demands humility on the part of the men who administer Word and Sacrament. Man needs to be humbled so that he will bow to the authority of God and distribute His grace in the manner instituted and ordained. When the words and works of men are allowed to interfere or completely displace what God has decreed, the results are disastrous.

Therefore, when placed in the hypothetical situation of choosing between an evil man who proclaims the Gospel in Word and Sacraments and a good man who proclaims things other than the Gospel, the former is preferable. But the situation is set up not to distinguish between good and evil men, but to emphasize the importance of the pure and narrow Gospel. For without this Gospel there is no means of grace and there is no Church.

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<sup>22</sup>Sasse, We Confess the Sacraments, 22.

<sup>23</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 33.

It is not uncommon to find individuals in our denomination who believe that the Church should be identified by its giving and caring. It is not even rare to find such beliefs among our teachers and pastors. When giving and caring are thought of and taught as the signs of the Christian Church, it is evidence of false teaching. Others give the impression that a congregation can only call itself Christian if it is involved with certain programs and registers certain increases in membership and offerings. Such an impression betrays a false teaching underneath. And notions of the ministry have taken odd turns. On various occasions I have seen pastors censured for not attending evangelism workshops or participating in particular programs or involving themselves in certain campaigns. When such things (as beneficial as they may or may not be) are dictated as necessary and thought of as signs of the true ministry, it is indicative of something false, extra-Scriptural and non-Confessional. For what do we believe to be the true signs of the holy Christian Church? Article VII of the Augsburg Confession teaches that the eternal Christian Church

. . . is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.<sup>24</sup>

Edmund Schlink comments on this article, "The church is defined as the assembly of all believers and the assembly, in

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<sup>24</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 32.

turn, is defined by what is done in its midst."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the means of grace are the proper and only true signs of the Christian Church. While it is certainly true that the individual Christian will bear fruit because he is a new creature in Christ, it is not true that he becomes a Christian because of his fruit-bearing. He becomes a Christian because of God's grace. And the Church, from individual congregations to synodical entities, cannot be judged to be Christian by its charitable programs or other endeavors. It is shown to be Christian by God's activity in their midst. His grace and love offered through the merits of Jesus Christ are the hallmark of the Church. And it is a disgrace (no pun intended) when a congregation or any collection of congregations calls itself evangelical and does not emphasize and perpetually administer and proclaim the saving Gospel in Word and Sacraments.

While it may be that a particular congregation, or, as has occasionally been the case, the LC-MS will offer assistance to disaster victims, these actions (though very commendable) are not certain signs that they are members of the Christian Church. Neither do the ongoing programs sponsored by our Synod, its districts, and congregations to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and so forth, in any way offer the certain indication that we are part of the body of Christ. If these were accepted as signs of salvation and membership with the

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<sup>25</sup>Edmund Schlink, Theology of the Lutheran Confessions, trans. Paul F. Koehnke & Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 168.

true Body, then liberal ethical societies and philanthropic atheists would have to be considered saved. And if they were considered saved it would have to be on the basis of their works alone and not because of God's grace being offered through Word and Sacraments. No! the only viable sign of the Christian Church is the Gospel. This is the Church's true business.

Not only does this fact keep the Church on track and about its proper work, but it can offer comfort to the congregation which is enduring a climate of spiritual uncertainty. When the Saxon immigrants, forerunners of the Missouri Synod, found themselves in a great spiritual crisis over allegations raised against their leader, Martin Stephan, the question was circulated, "Are we members of the true Church?" This anxiety over their membership in the body of Christ was answered by Walther. Central to Walther's understanding of the Church and ministry was this thesis (articulated later in his theses on Church and ministry):

Though the true church in the proper sense of the term is essentially [according to its true nature] invisible, its existence can nevertheless be definitely recognized, namely, by the marks of the pure preaching of God's Word and the administration of the sacraments according to Christ's institution.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, we may be confident of our membership in Christ's body and the presence of God's grace through the means of grace.

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<sup>26</sup>C. F. W. Walther, Church and Ministry, trans. J. T. Mueller (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), 67.



In the same way, then, it is not the preaching of the Law which offers conclusive evidence that a congregation is Christian. Many religions of the world, philosophies of men, and service organizations guide themselves under strict moral codes completely compatible with (and in some cases identical to) the decalogue, the "golden rule," and the principles of loving "God" above all and loving neighbors as yourself. As pleasing as these things may be to the eye and ear, they are no indication of Christ's saving presence. But when the Gospel is preached and offered as the dominating feature of our collective character and the Sacraments are administered in tune with the Gospel, there is the sure and certain sign that that congregation is in unity with the holy Christian Church.

CHAPTER III  
THE GOSPEL OF GOD AND THE LAW OF GOD

It has already been asserted that through the mere preaching of the Law no individual will be able to appropriate for himself the blessings and benefits of full salvation merited by Jesus Christ. The Law is the Word of God and is a critical part of the divine message; but for the efficient and effective ministry of the Gospel it must be realized, as Martin Luther declared, that ". . . the Law and the Gospel are two altogether contrary doctrines."<sup>1</sup>

The failure to recognize and to utilize this critical information is one of the chief causes of improper ministration of the Gospel. The answer is not to move to the opposite extreme and preach the Gospel alone. When Paul charges Timothy (and the Church) to ". . . preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching,"<sup>2</sup> he is calling for the preaching of the total Word, Law and Gospel. This charge, however, does

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<sup>1</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26, Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1-4, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 208.

<sup>2</sup>2 Tim. 4:2. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version.

not negate the truth that these two main doctrines are different and must be distinguished from each other.

Each of these doctrines is necessary for the proper proclamation of the Gospel. Note what that statement indicates. It establishes that the Gospel, here used in its proper and narrow sense, is the foremost goal; and it therefore places the Law in a subservient position without questioning its authority as the Word of God. The reason that the Law must be in such a position is because it cannot, in any of its uses, save a sinner from the wrath of God or provide eternal life. As was stated previously, the Law can not function as a means of divine grace. It is quite true that the Law promises the same as the Gospel, namely salvation and eternal life; but there is a difference. Martin Chemnitz points this out when he says, "The promises of the Law are conditional. But the promise of the Gospel concerning the remission of sins is free."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Law promises the same great blessings from God as the Gospel provided one obeys its demands without the slightest transgression. Since this is an impossibility for a fallen human being, the blessings of God (namely, salvation and eternal life) are unattainable through this method.

With the Gospel the blessings are given as gifts because of the work and merits of Jesus Christ. They are not the

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<sup>3</sup>Martin Chemnitz, Justification: The Chief Article of Christian Doctrine as Expounded in 'Loci Theologici', trans. J. A. O. Preus (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 24.

reward for our fulfilling the demands of the Law. No such demands are made by the Gospel--it only offers. Any doctrine that would function as a means of grace must offer grace. The Law can make no such claim. Thus Luther summed up the argument as presented in Galatians: "We are justified solely by faith in Christ, without works; and the Holy Spirit is granted solely by hearing the message of the Gospel with faith, not by the message of the Law or by the works of the Law."<sup>4</sup> C. F. W. Walther says: "Since the Fall the Law, you know, has but a single function . . . to lead men to the knowledge of their sins. It has no power to renew them. That power is vested solely in the Gospel."<sup>5</sup>

That being the case, why do we bother with the preaching of the Law at all? Why do we administer the Law in the execution of Christian discipline? Walther answers in the quotation cited above. We preach and administer the Law for the purpose of showing men their sins. He adds later, "When we preach the the Law, it is not to make men saints, but sinners."<sup>6</sup> But that is not where we leave them. This is all done in order to lay the necessary foundation for preaching the Gospel. Again, Walther: "True, we have to preach the Law, only, however, as a preparation for the Gospel. The ultimate aim in our preaching

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<sup>4</sup>Luther, Lectures on Galatians, 208.

<sup>5</sup>C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 236.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 293.

of the Law must be to preach the Gospel."<sup>7</sup> In this way the Law is understood to be the Word of God and as being necessary; but, also, as being subservient to the Gospel because it cannot bring grace. In this latter point the two have been sharply distinguished.

In his comments on Isaiah 28.21 Luther remarks, ". . . the proper work and nature of God is to save."<sup>8</sup> This is the work of the Gospel. In order to accomplish His proper work, however, God must also perform an alien work. Luther finds this in the afflictions and trials of life which assist in the mortification of the flesh. God's alien work is also found in the ministry of the Law, because the Law kills and destroys. Walther makes an essential observation when he states, "A New Testament preacher as such has to preach nothing else than the Gospel. He is really discharging an alien function when he preaches the Law."<sup>9</sup> Since the minister is the messenger of God, anything alien to God is, in his role as messenger, alien to the minister. Among the most difficult things to do when proclaiming the Word is to retain this distinction that the Law belongs to the alien work of God and the Gospel belongs to the proper work of God.

Why is this so? Because in our fallen state men confuse

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>8</sup> Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 16, Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 1-39, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), 233.

<sup>9</sup> Walther, Law and Gospel, 405.

these doctrines and perceive that the Law is proper while the Gospel is an alien Word. This confusion is a hurdle that must be jumped to prevent the Law from becoming the predominant feature of our proclamation. It is no easy task to make this distinction and live by it. The root of the problem is stated by Chemnitz: "The doctrine of the Law to a certain degree is known to human reason. But the Gospel is a mystery hidden from the world, revealed only by the ministration of the Spirit."<sup>10</sup>

The Law has been written on men's hearts. In this way it is partially known to man and therefore seems to him to be a proper work. But it is because it is only known partially, that is, in a dulled fashion and not in a clear pronouncement which causes general despair, which accounts for the fact that the Law is frequently appealing to people. It also gives account for the fact that many preachers are predisposed to preaching the Law. It appeals to their own natural inclinations to view the Law as proper work, and, since it gets immediate results and favorable response it satisfies his ego. As long as the preaching is not too particular and does not accuse the majority of the congregation too strongly, everyone is agreed that the sermon is sensible and speaks God's Word.

One LC-MS preacher, on an LC-MS radio station, spoke favorably of preaching sermons against abortion, homosexuality, and other gross moral transgressions because those were the sort of things that his congregation wanted to hear. This is

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<sup>10</sup>Martin Chemnitz, Justification, 24.

not an unfair summation of what he was saying--nor is that sentiment peculiar to that one preacher. But such preaching, which is prevalent in some congregations (and in some cases, denominations), is improper. Who cares how loudly and vehemently a preacher attacks abortion and homosexuality? An isolated individual who may have committed offenses in these categories might be crushed by such preaching--but the larger percentage of the audience will be able to comfortably agree that these things are horrible and an abomination to the Lord. The general consensus would be that this preacher and his message were proper. While it would be correct to say that it was "his message" (as opposed to the Lord's), it would be a gross misunderstanding to declare that such preaching was proper. (Granted, there may be certain conditions under which these messages would be appropriate--but the average congregation would not provide the correct climate.)

Sister Bessie, an itinerant preacher in the novel Tobacco Road, is a spokesman and advocate of this manner of preaching. She says:

Good preachers don't preach about God and heaven, and things like that. They always preach against something, like hell and the devil. Them is things to be against. It wouldn't do a preacher no good to preach for God. He's got to preach against the devil and all wicked and sinful things. That's what the people like to hear about.<sup>11</sup>

God is certainly opposed to murder (including abortion) and to sexual perversion (including homosexuality) and these

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<sup>11</sup> Erskine Caldwell, Tobacco Road (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1932; Signet Books, 1982) 150.

things may be used to illustrate the sinfulness of man. But to make sin in general or any sin in particular the thrust and essential content of a sermon is to preach the lowest form of legalism. It is a legalism which is sensationalism.

No matter how appealing and proper the Law may seem to the minister or the congregation, it is crucial that the Law function only as a genuinely alien work so that the Gospel might perform the proper work. In one of his Pentecost sermons [1849; text: Acts 2:1-13] Walther makes this point clear:

The Law must first enlighten you concerning your sins before the Gospel can comfort you concerning them. The Law must first convict you of sin before the Gospel can sanctify you. The Law must first cast you down and slay you before the Gospel can raise you up and make you alive again. But you who are already slain by the Law; you who fear the threatenings of the Law; you who have obtained a bad conscience through the Law; you who fear death, fear judgment, fear hell and damnation; you who at the same time feel your infirmity, your contrary heart, that you are dry as sand, and as empty and desolate as charred ruins--you may think that you are the least qualified for the gift of the Holy Spirit. But rest assured that you, precisely you, are the one on whom the Holy Spirit would gladly descend as dew from heaven. . . . It is not a matter of merit and worthiness, but of free grace and mercy. Therefore, do not seek the Holy Ghost in the Law. Do not exhaust yourselves in achieving a willing spirit through your own preparation and desire for improvement. So doing, you will remain in your helplessness.<sup>12</sup>

When the Law is confused with the Gospel by presenting it as the proper work of God, the inevitable result will be self-righteousness and a false theology of justification by works. When the Law is distinguished from the Gospel and presented as

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<sup>12</sup>C. F. W. Walther, The Word of His Grace: Occasional and Festival Sermons, Ed. and Trans. the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee (Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Company, Inc., 1978) 251.



the alien work of God, however, the listeners will be prepared for the proper work of the Gospel. The message is not God's when it allows for the delusional logic that we can initiate or sustain a saving righteousness by virtue of what we do or have avoided doing. The Law fulfills its alien function when it convinces that one cannot be saved by self-righteousness or by observing the works of the Law. Then the preacher brings the proper portion of God's message, as Luther phrases it, "Let the preacher say, then: 'I not only preach Christ to you as the One who forgives, but I also give you His righteousness, so that, clothed with Him, you may have all that is His.'" <sup>13</sup>

With the proper work of God, however, there is still confusion. In the citation from Walther's Pentecost sermon, note how he takes care to state that those who have been slain by the Law may feel that the Gospel is too good for them. This is because it is a strange message. The Gospel is foreign to them and they cannot relate to it by natural reason alone. As Paul writes, "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." <sup>14</sup> It is only through the ministry of the Gospel that one might come to possess the Spirit and thereby have the faith to accept the proper message of God. Only the Spirit can make this Word of

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<sup>13</sup> Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 17, Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 4.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor. 2:14.

Grace and all other gifts of God understandable--only the Spirit can reveal these mysterious and hidden spiritual truths.<sup>15</sup>

The natural inclination toward the Law must be brought under complete control lest the Gospel be despised. Luther teaches:

The human heart neither understands nor believes that such a prize as the Holy Spirit can be granted solely through hearing with faith; but it thinks this way: 'The forgiveness of sins, deliverance from sin and death, the granting of the Holy Spirit, of righteousness, and of eternal life--this is all something important. Therefore you must do something great to obtain these inestimable gifts.' . . . . Because such a great treasure is being offered freely, it is despised.<sup>16</sup>

Once the Law has done its duty and made the sinner conspicuous to himself, the minister of the Gospel is obliged to do something that is contrary to human nature. He offers through the Word of the Gospel complete forgiveness and assurance of eternal life and all good blessings by virtue of the sacrifice and merits of Jesus Christ. One does not typically operate in this fashion. Children are raised with the notions that they will be rewarded when they do good and punished when they do bad. This is not an improper way to raise children. In most occupations, employees are paid for the work they do and are fired when they do the work improperly. This is accepted as the best way to do business. In society, criminals are forced to make satisfaction for their offenses by way of fines and incarceration and execution.

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 2:10-13.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, Lectures on Galatians, 213.

There is no better system known to man to punish wrongdoing and promote justice.

When it comes to the proclamation of the Gospel, however, matters are entirely different. The Gospel does not discourage these practical things when a parent deals with a child; an employer deals with an employee; or society deals with its criminals. But when God deals graciously with man He does so through the reconciliation established by His Son. Jesus Christ secured all the rewards for us and took upon Himself all of the punishment we deserved. We could not make ourselves holy but through faith in Christ we are given His holiness. The insurmountable obstruction to our salvation, namely, sin, has been removed by the sacrificial and sufficient work of the Redeemer. This message is declared in the Scriptures through two contrary teachings, the Law and the Gospel. The former, which is part of God's alien work, makes us sinners, while the latter, which is God's proper work, makes us saints. In our preaching the Word and in all other ministrations of the Gospel, these two doctrines must be understood and their distinctions scrupulously maintained so that the power of each may be proclaimed effectively. To exclude one is to diminish the other. To confuse them and commingle them is disastrous. Walther employs this pertinent illustration: "Take an instance from colors: when you combine yellow and blue, it is neither yellow nor blue, but green. In like manner there arises a third substance . . . when Law and Gospel are confounded in a

sermon."<sup>17</sup> And this third substance--the product of commingling Law and Gospel--is an impediment to the proclamation of the pure Gospel.

When the alien work of God is presented as being His proper work, and, conversely, when His proper work is presented as though it were alien, there is a contamination of the means of grace not only in terms of preaching, but also in relation to the proper administration of the Sacraments. It is no accident that the Roman Catholic Church, which created a false role for man in the process of justification and thereby promoted good works as though they were a means of grace, put a very short time limit on the efficacy of Baptism and offered penance as a viable substitute. The accent was not put on the actual absolution, but on what man could do to obtain the absolution. This process, which actually deals with contrition, tries to make contrition part of the Gospel. Walther recognizes how false their manner is: "To regard contrition as a cause of the forgiveness of sins is equivalent to turning the Law into a message of grace and the Gospel into Law--a perversion which overthrows the entire Christian religion."<sup>18</sup>

The genuine means of grace, Baptism, is cast aside. Its efficacy, which is as eternal as the Gospel which gives it its power, is denied and man steps in as a partner in his own salvation. And the Sacrament of the Altar is demoted in a similar

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<sup>17</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 35.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 250.

fashion. Man receives grace because he goes to Communion. The action and not the faith of the man is the operative thing. This clearly transgresses any notion of grace and turns the Sacrament into more of a bargain or deal than anything else. Again, Walther observes the truth of the matter: "It is a horrible doctrine, wholly contradicting the Bible, that divine grace is obtained if a person at least makes external use of the Sacraments."<sup>19</sup> Man's fanciful concepts of the proper and alien work of God contribute to this denial of the means of grace.

The Reformed ideas that the Sacraments are mere signs of God's grace and tokens of salvation rather than the means by which God communicates it to us demonstrate that they also put more stock in natural knowledge than revealed knowledge. For in the revealed Word there is no indication that the Sacraments are only signs of what has already taken place. In Reformed doctrine the Sacraments become sacrificial acts on the part of men. In contrast to this we must agree with M. Reu, who declared:

It is not a matter of indifference whether the Word is preached as the mere revelation of the divine will, independently of which the Spirit works where and when He listeth, or on the contrary as actual means and bearer of this Spirit. Whether baptism is conceived as having placed the hearers of the sermon in communion with God and as forming the basis of their entire life in Christ, or as merely a ceremony, divinely instituted indeed, but without any fundamental relation to their Christian development. Whether the Lord's Supper is regarded as consisting in mere bread and wine, bring home so

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 346.

forcibly to the believer the blessings of his salvation that he soars in spirit to heaven and there feeds on Christ, or on the contrary as 'the real body and blood of Christ, under the bread and wine, given unto us Christians to eat and to drink, as it was instituted by Christ.'<sup>20</sup>

Therefore we see that maintaining the proper distinction between the Law and Gospel is crucial to the preservation of pure doctrine and to the effective proclamation of the Word. The Law tells us we are sinners. The Gospel, in Word and Sacraments, tells us that Jesus receives sinners. The mistake is frequently made that people are told they must do something before Jesus can receive them. Here sanctification is mingled with justification. Here the message is declared that one must do certain works in order to become a Christian. This is foolish talk. Walther reminds us that one ". . . is not to become a different being, he is not to become purified, he is not to amend his conduct, before coming to Jesus. He who alone is able to make him a better man is Jesus."<sup>21</sup> Now we have appropriately moved from the area of justification to sanctification without mixing up the two and, more importantly, without sacrificing the integrity and power of the Gospel.

In this phase things are different from before. The Law is being used in a different way and the Gospel is now the driving force behind our good works. It is the grossest error

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<sup>20</sup>Reu, Homiletics: A Manual of the Theory and Practice of Preaching, trans. Albert Steinhäuser (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1924; reprint St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 70-71.

<sup>21</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 237.

when men assume that they are performing good works by obeying the Law when they have yet to be justified by Christ through the Gospel. Only after grace and salvation have been appropriated through faith in the Gospel can one properly make an application of the Law toward Christian living. John H. C. Fritz states, "The preacher must not fail, when encouraging his people to good works, to apply the proper motive power for the doing of good works, to wit, the love of Christ. Sanctification must be based upon justification."<sup>22</sup>

It is a falsehood, popularly believed, that Lutherans do not "believe in" good works. On the contrary, good works are staunchly defended in the Lutheran Confessions as necessary. The Formula of Concord teaches ". . . that all men, but especially those who are regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit, are obligated to do good works."<sup>23</sup> The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, "Good works should be done because God has commanded them and in order to exercise our faith, to give testimony, and to render thanks. For these reasons good works must necessarily be done."<sup>24</sup> What Lutherans have demanded, however, so that the Law and Gospel be properly distinguished, is that people understand that good works are not necessary for salvation. That is to say, they have nothing to

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<sup>22</sup>John H. C. Fritz, The Essentials of Preaching (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1948), 61.

<sup>23</sup>Theodore G. Tappert, ed. & trans., The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 476.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

do with justification.

The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord offers the following:

. . . It is necessary to keep a distinction in mind, namely, that when the word 'necessary' is used in this context, it is not to be understood as implying compulsion but only as referring to the order of God's immutable will, whose debtors we are, as his commandment indicates when it enjoins the creature to obey its Creator.<sup>25</sup>

And,

When we teach that good works are necessary . . . we must be extremely careful that works are not drawn into and mingled with the article of justification and salvation. Therefore we correctly reject the propositions that good works are necessary for the believer's salvation, or that it is impossible to be saved without good works. . . .<sup>26</sup>

When the good works of a Christian are properly presented in this fashion, the glory and praise due to Christ as our Redeemer is preserved because, man is not allowed to take even the slightest credit for working his own justification. Once he has been justified and made a new creature, however, he will bear fruit. In this process of sanctification, we teach, as Walther summarizes: "We do not by any means reject cooperation on the part of man after his regeneration; we rather urge it upon him lest he die again; and incur the danger of being lost forever."<sup>27</sup> Here the Law does not demand or motivate, but it does teach us what the will of God is. In this capacity it no longer terrorizes or intimidates, but it calmly informs us

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 554.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 264-265.



about holy living. Our desire to know how to execute Christian responsibility is a response to and product of our rebirth through the gracious action of God.

This new and proper holy living and these genuine good works must be impressed upon Christians. But this message must never overpower the proper proclamation of the Gospel. For these good works are not a means of grace and can never substitute for the Gospel. Richard Lenski warns, "What a mistake to overlook the Christ for us, the grace for us, the saving gifts for us! Preach the Redeemer first, then the Example."<sup>28</sup> For there are many preachers who constantly use Jesus Christ as the supreme example of holy living without sufficiently (if at all) proclaiming Him as the triumphant and gracious Savior of the world. Luther teaches that Christ must be accepted first as a gift and then as an example. "Both forms of proclamation have their proper time; if this is not observed, the proclamation of salvation becomes a curse."<sup>29</sup>

By this consideration of Law and Gospel we see how difficult and necessary it is to properly handle the Word of God so that the Gospel, the primary and peculiar power of the Christian ministry, may be preserved. For it is only in its pure form, untainted by the preacher's mismanagement of the Law

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<sup>28</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Sermon (Columbus, Ohio: The Lutheran Book Concern, n.d.), 119-120.

<sup>29</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 27, Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 5-6, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 35.

(second and third uses), that the Gospel is an undeniable means of divine grace which performs God's proper work of salvation.

CHAPTER IV  
THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORDS OF MAN

Three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" It grieved Peter, whose conscience was probably still troubled over his three denials, that the Lord asked the question a third time. But the questions served as the basis for the thrice-issued command: "Feed my sheep."<sup>1</sup> "How should one feed the sheep?" Martin Luther asked--then answered, "Only by preaching the Word of God, only by preaching faith."<sup>2</sup>

It has been established that preaching the Word of God means proclaiming the Law and Gospel, properly distinguishing the one from the other. That this is difficult can be ascertained by anyone who strives to preach in this proper manner. But despite the difficulties that will be encountered, the minister of the Gospel must work and struggle to be an

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<sup>1</sup>John 21:15-17. In verses 15 and 17, the verb used is *βόσκειν*, "feed, tend." In verse 16, the verb used is *ποιμαίνω*, which has a broader meaning of "tending" and includes "guiding, herding, and shepherding." The noun, *ποιμὴν*, "shepherd," becomes the word used for "pastor," as in Eph 4:11. Check William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 690; R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 1417-28.

<sup>2</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, General ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 51, Sermons I, ed. & trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 64.

effective instrument in the proclamation of God's gracious Word. For echoing through the corridors of time and tradition is the Redeemer's question: "Do you love me?"; and with it comes the command: "Feed my sheep."

The concern that the Word of God be preached faithfully and that Law and Gospel not be confused is legitimate since it is a difficult task and since preachers so frequently fail. One should not excuse such failure. Intentional or not, it is a false way to teach when Law and Gospel are confused. And the consequence is that the flock of God is not properly nourished.

Confusing these two main doctrines which comprise the Word of God is not, however, the only manner of false teaching. There is the horrible fashion of substituting for genuine preaching the thoughts and doctrines of men. This occurs both in the flagrant con-artistry of those who desire only power and financial gain and in the preaching of those who ignorantly add to or subtract from the Word of God. Though the motives of these two types may be a great distance apart, what can be said for the sheep? What does it matter to them if the poison they were fed was given through callousness or carelessness. The warning must be clearly sounded that any false teaching, intentional or inadvertent, perpetual or occasional, may lead to spiritual and eternal death. The true teachers feed the sheep to nourish and strengthen them. The false teachers, as Luther says, ". . . feed the sheep as the butchers do on Easter eve."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

The one who loves the Savior and wishes to serve Him and the flock will feed for eternal life and not for the slaughter.

To a pastor (Timothy) Paul wrote this warning: "Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith."<sup>4</sup> To a congregation (the Colossians) he sent this word of caution: "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ."<sup>5</sup> The whole church, shepherd and sheep, is to be on guard against this false teaching which places man's word over God's.

The Reformation was an attempt to set straight the visible church which had for centuries been intermingling the teachings of men with the teachings of God. The hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church usurped the authority of God and robbed Christ of His glory when it began to issue new laws and place them on par with the divine Law; when it introduced a gospel contrary to that which the apostles preached; and when it gave the traditions of men as strong a voice as the Word of God. Against these things God offered testimony.<sup>6</sup> Even though this church which Luther and others tried to reform stands as

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<sup>4</sup>1 Tim. 6:20b-21a; see also 4:6-7a, 16. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version.

<sup>5</sup>Col. 2:8.

<sup>6</sup>For example, 1 Tim. 4:1-5; Gal. 1:6-9; Titus 1:10-11; Deut. 4:2, 12:32; Prov. 30:6; 1 John 4:1-3; 2 Peter 2:1-3.

a monument of sacrilege, it by no means held nor holds a monopoly on this type of arrogance. One may cross any denominational line and find man's doctrines being proclaimed as Gospel truths. One may wander within the borders of the Missouri Synod and still find some who have forgotten the principles of the Apostolic faith and put in their place nonviable substitutes.

M. Reu writes:

The Reformation recalled to men's minds the truth that God's Word alone has place and power in the Church and bestows peace and comfort. Hence all fables and human wisdom were banished from the sermon as from the service, and men were reminded that the sermon can possess dignity, power and authority, impart grace, and make men certain of their salvation, only in proportion as it is the proclamation of the Word of God.<sup>7</sup>

Only when the Word of God is the source and power of the proclamation can there be any divine authority at work. Only when the Gospel in particular is proclaimed can there be any giving of divine and saving grace. It is a gross impertinence when we make our personal opinions the crux of the message. We remove the true crux, the Word of the cross, and replace it with the thought of the hour. A portion (large or small) of what is said under these conditions may be true and helpful-- but if it is not the Gospel of the living God it will do nothing to aid an individual in his spiritual progress. If it is not the specific news of Jesus Christ's ministry of

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<sup>7</sup>M. Reu, Homiletics; A Manual of the Theory and Practice of Preaching, trans. Albert Steinhäuser (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1924; reprint Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 45-46.

reconciliation, it will not save a single soul from eternal damnation.

Norman Vincent Peale's "Positive Thinking" may very well be of use to some people. It does sound positive. It may change an individual's life. It might possibly make someone feel good inside and inspire productivity and increase personal income and decrease anxiety and health risks. But it is not the Gospel. It will not, on its own, bring the gracious power of Christ's saving work. Peale claims that his book The Power of Positive Thinking ". . . teaches applied Christianity; a simple yet scientific system of practical techniques of successful living that works."<sup>8</sup> The opening phrase of the first chapter is indicative of the entire message of this man: "Believe in yourself!"<sup>9</sup>

Faith in yourself will never accomplish what faith in Christ can accomplish. The former may bring contentment in temporal matters but cannot offer eternal peace; the latter brings the power of God and His peace with the promise of eternal life. These are not interchangeable concepts or gifts. One delivers only what one puts into it. The other, the true Gospel, delivers everything that Christ has put into the work of salvation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in one of his Finkenwalde Lectures

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<sup>8</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, The Power of Positive Thinking (New York: Random House, Inc., 1952), xi.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 13.

on Homiletics, told his students, "Our speech is not a spontaneous witness, but is commissioned by and bound by the biblical witness. It does not spring from our own private interests or initiative."<sup>10</sup> But the temptation is great to tell a congregation what we think, only using the sermon text as an excuse or pretense. Peale claims his plan is applied Christianity. But in the final analysis, his plan does not fit in with what Christ teaches at all. The ministry of Law and Gospel does not promote self-esteem. The Law will not allow us to look at ourselves and decide that we are not so bad after all. Rather, it convicts us of our transgressions and crushes our spirit. The Gospel never claims that we receive God's grace because there was some inherent beauty in us. The Gospel teaches true grace and tells of the great blessings God gives apart from any worthiness in us. But Peale, and all who preach with this jargon of psychological self-esteem, have created a new witness which cannot be coordinated with the Scriptural truths.<sup>11</sup> They pretend to remove guilt by ignoring it rather than absolving sin through the blood of Jesus Christ.

And there are other ways in which men have proclaimed a

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<sup>10</sup> Clyde E. Fant, Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1975), 132-133.

<sup>11</sup> Another prominent example of a preacher who has mixed psychology with the Gospel is Robert H. Schuller. His material principle is "Possibility Thinking." He tells what his formal principle is: "Where the sixteenth-century Reformation turned our focus to sacred Scripture as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem!" Self Esteem: The New Reformation (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 38.



different gospel. It is declared by some that God loves us so much that He intends for us to have every earthly blessing possible. Material wealth is the essence of this gospel. Big homes, luxury automobiles, and overabundant bank accounts are the signs of God's grace. Against such false teachers, who imagine "that godliness is a means of gain," Paul makes these statements:

There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.<sup>12</sup>

God declares, through His apostle, that of the many things a person can gain through His Gospel, material wealth is not one of them. While riches in and of themselves are not condemned, we are warned that they might lead us away from the true faith. This is the conclusive testimony which exposes the incongruity that exists between this gospel of men and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The false word makes the love of money and other temporal goods the soul of its message; the true Word calls such love the root of all evils. The preacher of the true Gospel will proclaim that incomparable riches are given to the faithful, but they are not riches as the world understands them. Paul said, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the

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<sup>12</sup><sub>1</sub> Tim. 6:5-10.

unsearchable riches of Christ."<sup>13</sup>

The gospels which teach that the reward and/or goal of faith include temporal wealth and joys are false gospels. It is not true, however, that the joys of this life are false joys. As C. F. W. Walther indicates:

Not infrequently they [young ministers] exceed the bounds of propriety by saying: 'Oh, those poor worldly people! They are without joys, any peace, any rest!' That is not true at all. When worldly people hear a statement of that kind, they think: 'That preacher is a simpleton, to be sure. What does he know about us? We have joy, peace, and quiet indeed.'<sup>14</sup>

The truth is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ functions apart from the "joy, peace, and quiet" of the world. We can proclaim that the eternal joys and peace are reserved only for those who believe in Jesus Christ. We can honestly declare that most of the pleasures of the world are not evil while we also warn that they may be dealt with in an evil fashion. We must proclaim in a clear manner that the grace of God offered through Jesus Christ is the only absolution from sin and the only hope for eternal life.

Related to the wealth gospel (and frequently taught simultaneously) is the health gospel. This word is also wrapped up in the flesh as it declares that the faithful will be healed of all their infirmities. The true bane of this teaching is not what it does to the ones who are "healed," but

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<sup>13</sup>Eph. 3:8.

<sup>14</sup>C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 54.

what it does to the ones who are not. If one becomes convinced that those who have faith in God will be healed, it becomes a most serious matter when one is not healed. There are two alternative and opposite extremes of despair: either "I do not have enough faith," or "God does not keep His word." The truth, however, is that the one who believes in this manner has become attached to a false gospel.

The false gospels all sound like good news and they all promise good things: esteem, wealth, healing. But they are vested in the power of men and demons and must therefore end in failure and evil. Jesus Christ also offers esteem, wealth, and healing--but in His higher understanding of these things and only through His death and resurrection. What is truly offered by God in His Gospel is not self-esteem, earthly wealth, or physical healing but the righteousness of Christ, the riches of His grace and mercy, and the healing of our souls. The other blessings might come as well--but they are not the necessary products of Christ's work of redemption. The common link between all these false gospels is that they are demanding signs and seeking wisdom. Here are the Jews and Greeks of the modern world, so regretfully similar to their ancient counterparts. "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."<sup>15</sup>

Apart from these major trends (which have manifested

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<sup>15</sup><sub>1</sub> Cor. 1:22-23.

themselves again and again under different leaders and names), there is the individual minister who through arrogance and/or ignorance fills the time allotted for the Word of God with his opinions. He is the perpetual fountain of advice and criticism who speaks in the name of the Lord and yet infrequently, if ever, brings the Lord's message of peace and reconciliation to the people. This can occur when he preaches to the congregation or when he ministers to individuals seeking spiritual help. The minister begins to think of himself as a psychologist, sex therapist, politician, or activist. A Scripture text simply reminds him of something he had wanted to say anyway, and so he will twist and alter, edit and ignore the Word of God so that it does not, in the end, interfere with his message. This is a curse to a Christian congregation.

John W. Behnken, in one of his radio sermons broadcast in 1949, had these comments for preachers:

. . . these words of the Savior ['Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!' Luke 11:28] have something very positive to say. We must not attempt to entertain men with all kinds of so-called sermons on social improvement. It brings no spiritual blessing to the hearts of sinners to hear discussions of political questions, of moral issues, of civic advancement, and, for that matter, any other temporal issue. What God wants sinners to hear is His Word. . . . Unless we proclaim the Word of God, we miss the mark. . . . Only the Word of God can save sinners.<sup>16</sup>

Every preacher in the Missouri Synod was trained and is certified with the knowledge that he must preach the Word of God, properly distinguishing Law and Gospel. Every minister in

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<sup>16</sup> John W. Behnken, Mercies Manifold, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 117-118.

our church body knows that the means of grace are the Word and Sacraments and that the Word and Sacraments are means of grace. But knowing these things and applying them are two different items. One does not have to listen to too many sermons before the sad fact is apparent that not all preachers in the LC-MS are proclaiming the unadulterated Gospel of Jesus Christ. Behnken's comments are relevant today. There are ministers who would just as soon preach a sermon on men walking on the moon, prayer in public schools, or spanking as a legitimate means of disciplining children than to tell the assembly of the love of God manifested in His Son.

While we may be amazed at scientific wonders and outraged over volatile public issues and could probably piece together a nice essay on the use of corporal punishment, these things are not pertinent to the saving Gospel. There is no issue so pressing that it must supplant true preaching of the Word of God. There may be issues to which the Word of God needs to be applied in the life of a congregation and the preacher may be justified in providing a relevant sermon out of pastoral concern. In this manner Luther preached a scathing sermon "On Soberness and Moderation" to the congregation in Wittenberg. The level of gluttony in Germany alarmed him and he was not afraid to tell them, ". . . Germany is a land of hogs and a filthy people which debauches its body and its life. If you were going to paint it, you would have to paint a pig."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Luther, Sermons I, 292.

The first impression might be that this sermon would be no different from those false sermons on abortion or homosexuality. But there is a difference. Many members of this congregation were committing the sin of drunkenness. With such a prevalent sin those who were not yet committing it would be tempted to do so. While a preacher might consider using abortion and homosexuality as examples of sin being condoned by society and while he might offer a warning within a sermon (when the content and text would allow it) against these sins, they are not things and issues which affect the majority of a congregation and should be discussed with concerned individuals in a counseling or disciplining atmosphere.

Most legalistic and morality sermons I have heard or read tend to begin and end with the preaching of the Law without any genuine expression of concern for the offenders. Not so with Luther. After he uses the harsh language cited previously, he exposes the pastoral purpose for such scolding: "A father does not punish his son in order to make him spiteful and ruin him in body and soul, but rather to ward off his vice; he wants to purify him and wipe away his faults."<sup>18</sup>

Another tendency in legalism is that one tends to dwell on favorite subjects and rage against them over and over. While Luther did preach this sermon against drunkenness, he did not make it a predominant theme in his preaching. Unlike some of the American evangelists who were (and some still are)

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 298.

constantly tying the living of the Christian life to the issue of drinking alcoholic beverages, Luther stated God's teaching on this matter and did not belabor the point. As a true evangelical, Luther's preaching career is characterized by the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>19</sup>

When the preparation for a sermon begins, the preacher should make an effort to remind himself that he is to preach the Gospel. When an individual comes to the pastor with a guilty conscience or a burdensome problem, the pastor must apply the Word of God to the situation. One must avoid the silly practice of making adiaphora into law and the Law into adiaphora. The social graces and issues of fashion should never intervene with the serious work of preaching God's Word. The minister of the Gospel should never forsake his duty of feeding the sheep with the truth that God has revealed. In short, as the church has prayed again and again, "Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God . . . that Thy Word . . . may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and

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<sup>19</sup>Another type of pastoral sermon is one delivered in a time of crisis. Walther begins a sermon preached after a devastating St. Louis fire with these words: "It is, as you know, not my usual custom to speak to you on current events from this hallowed place. A minister of the Gospel should not express his opinions regarding such matters and entertain his listeners in this way. On the contrary, he is to set forth God's holy Word. But now we live in a time when it is impossible for a Christian pastor to evade speaking of contemporary events." He then delivers his sermon on what lessons are taught in such disastrous events. C. F. W. Walther, The Word of His Grace: Occasional and Festival Sermons, Ed. and Trans. the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee (Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Company, Inc., 1978) 167.

edifying of Christ's holy people . . . ."20

When the preacher forgets his role as messenger of God's Word and begins to use the time reserved for that message to express his personal thoughts, he has forgotten that only the Gospel brings the power of salvation. Anything he has to say that is not directly related to God's Word and the proclamation of the Gospel is irrelevant (when preaching). John Fritz offers this reminder: ". . . While the preacher cannot add anything to the power of the Word of God, yet--sad, but true--the preacher can stand in the way of, and hinder, the work of the Holy Spirit."21

The man who does not preach the Word of God preaches the words of men. Ultimately it can be said that he is preaching himself--for he is proclaiming words which his intellect and personal tastes have selected or with which he has agreed. The end result is that he razes the true temple, breaks its foundation and suppresses the work of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who fails to minister with the Gospel takes part in building a new tower of Babel.

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<sup>20</sup>The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, The Lutheran Hymnal (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 14.

<sup>21</sup>John H. C. Fritz, Pastoral Theology, Second Edition (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945; Heritage Edition, 1977), 78 (page reference is to the Heritage Edition).



## CHAPTER V

### THE GOSPEL

A fair amount of effort has already been exerted to explain that when the term "Gospel" is employed in reference to the means of grace, the term is being used in its most precise and narrow sense. The wider sense of the term "Gospel" does not exclude the narrow elements, but it does include items that do not function as a means of grace. For example, the Confessions speak of repentance in terms of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> This is not improper when one understands that the word "Gospel" is being used in a wider sense. Martin Chemnitz freely admits that the common definition of the Gospel as the preaching of repentance and the remission of sins can be found repeatedly in the Confessions. He adds, however, "They err and do not do rightly who in such a way defend this common definition that they necessarily obscure and bury that foundation which is the proper doctrine of the Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

C. F. W. Walther also points out:

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore G. Tappert, ed. & trans., The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 115.62; 185.29; 278.54; 478.6; 559.5.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Chemnitz, Justification: The Chief Article of Christian Doctrine as Expounded in 'Loci Theologici', trans. J. A. O. Preus (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 27.

Our Lutheran Confessions follow the Bible in using the term Gospel now in the wide, now in the narrow sense. . . . You will have to note this fact in order to understand our thesis correctly: a commingling of Law and Gospel takes place when the Gospel of Christ, that is, the Gospel in<sup>3</sup> the narrow sense, is turned into a preaching of repentance.

It is part of the nature of language in general that some words may be used in wide and narrow senses. In English, for example, the word "drink," both as a noun and a verb, refers to alcoholic beverages when used in a narrow sense and any liquid refreshment when used in a wide sense. Therefore, when the advertisements urge us not to drink and drive, all sensible people are aware that the narrow use of the word is being employed.

All this points to the fact that the Church cannot afford to have the Gospel proper lost in the shuffle of the Gospel in the broader sense. In our worship services, the Gospel pericope is usually concluded with the phrase "This is the Gospel of the Lord." This is an indication that the reading has been taken from the works of the four evangelists. It is possible, however, that the pericope did not contain the Gospel proper, but only Law. (This happens, for example, in certain selections from the Sermon on the Mount.) People who expect that the "Good News" should leave them with a good impression may be confused when the Gospel reading solicits discomfort. They need to appreciate that a broader use of the term "Gospel" is being used in that situation.

Chemnitz states, "There are those who argue that the

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<sup>3</sup> C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 278.

Gospel properly speaking not only contains the promise of grace but also the teaching of good works. Such people do not understand what they are saying."<sup>4</sup> There indeed are those who feel that the third use of the Law is actually a function of the Gospel. While the use of the terms "Gospel admonitions" or "Gospel imperatives" is proper in the wide sense of Gospel, it is improper if allowed to contaminate the specific sense of the Gospel. Gospel admonitions will never lead to the salvation Christ has secured. They have nothing to do with justification.

The reason that the Gospel proper must be painstakingly isolated from everything else is to assure that the Gospel proper is present in our ministry. It is not in any way meant to exclude the preaching of repentance or to forbid urging the congregation to execute Christian responsibility. These things are necessary--but not necessary for salvation. The most common phenomenon is that preachers who are not careful to analyze their ministry for its Gospel content, tend to ignore the specific use of the Gospel or else distribute it stingily. Preaching the Gospel is much more than simply saying things in conjunction with Jesus' name.

I once heard a sermon in which the preacher said that he had attended services at an LC-MS congregation where the minister did not mention Jesus Christ at all in his sermon. He was justly critical of such a method of preaching. In the sermon

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<sup>4</sup>Chemnitz, Justification, 27.

he himself was preaching, he did mention Jesus--but never in direct relation to being our Savior. Neither of these sermons could possibly function as a means of grace because neither contained the saving Word, the Gospel in its proper form. This is a burdensome omission that can never be excused. Toss in a billion Gospel admonitions and there will still be a void. Preaching repentance from dawn to sunset will not introduce any person to the overwhelming grace of God. "Accordingly," Walther asserts, "preachers who do not clearly and plainly proclaim the Gospel . . . are not faithful in the discharge of their ministry and inflict great injury on men's souls."<sup>5</sup>

What is the content of this Gospel? Chemnitz calls it "the doctrine of free reconciliation or of the benefits of the Mediator."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, he lists what statements of Scripture are to be categorized and proclaimed as Gospel:

First, those which speak of the gratuitous mercy, love, grace, kindness, goodness, etc., of God the Father, sending His Son, choosing, calling, reconciling, adopting, receiving to life eternal those who believe, etc.

Second, all statements which speak of the office of the Mediator in His incarnation, cross, passion, resurrection, ascension, session at the right hand.

Third, that the Holy Spirit sets forth, offers, distributes, applies, seals these benefits by faith through the Word of the Gospel and through the sacraments instituted by the Son of God for this purpose.

Fourth, here belong also the very numerous statements of Scripture that, by the mercy of God on account of Christ the Mediator, we by faith receive and possess the gratuitous reconciliation, remission of sins, imputation of righteousness, acceptance by God to life eternal, the adoption, liberation from the law of sin and death,

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<sup>5</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 276.

<sup>6</sup>Chemnitz, Justification, 19.

liberation from the curse of the Law, the propitiation for sins, peace, joy, hope of the glory of God, the inheritance of salvation and of life everlasting, etc.<sup>7</sup>

The Gospel, as can plainly be seen, is the glorious message of what God has done for us, in Christ, to reconcile us to Him. The pivotal point of this Word is the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Thus Paul writes, ". . . the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God;" and, ". . . we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God;" and, "For in him [Christ] all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."<sup>8</sup>

All elements of the Gospel are connected to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christ crucified needs to be preached as the focus of our salvation. Here we say farewell to all the endeavors of men. Now it can be seen what a mockery and insult it is to introduce even the slightest possibility that man can work toward or cooperate in his justification. Because the Gospel is not merely the belief or proclamation that Christ suffered and died, but that He suffered and died

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent: Part I, trans. Fred Kramer (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 569-570.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 1:18; 1 Cor. 1:22,23; Col. 1:20 respectively, see also Col. 2:14; Eph. 2:16; Gal. 6:14. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version.

for us, to take away our sins, one can imply that this action of Christ was insufficient by falsely promoting good works. On the other hand, when the Gospel is properly proclaimed and the sufficiency of Christ's vicarious atonement is clearly maintained, then, and only then, can the third use of the Law be appropriately applied.

Since the Gospel preaches and brings the free grace of God, it is also necessary that no conditions ever be laid upon the listeners. Walther emphasizes this when he states, "God attaches no condition to His grace when He proffers it to a sinner and asks him to accept it. It would be no gift if He were to attach a condition."<sup>9</sup> As God's spokesman, ministers of the Gospel should never give an opposite impression by preaching conditional grace.

Philip Melanchthon writes in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, "We . . . call men's consciences away from the law to the Gospel, away from trust in their own works to thrust in the promise and in Christ; for the Gospel shows us Christ and promises the forgiveness of sins freely for his sake."<sup>10</sup> And this introduces an important aspect of the nature of the Gospel: it is the divine promise. Human experience does much to combat a secure understanding of promises. With man's fallen nature it is not uncommon for him to make a promise (without intention to fulfill it) just to get something

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<sup>9</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 270.

<sup>10</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 193.

immediately in return. It is also a common experience that men promise (sincerely) more than they can deliver. Man is subject to any number of circumstances which may not permit him to keep his word.

These conditions, however, are not applicable to God. In the first place, He does not promise simply to evoke worship or work out of us. In the second place, His attributes of omnipotence and omniscience assure us that He does not promise more than He can fulfill. When God gives His word, He gives His Word. A promise of God is fulfilled in fact (the ministry of Jesus) even if the ultimate and total fulfillment is postponed until the Day of the Lord. It is part of the Gospel proclamation that "God is faithful."<sup>11</sup>

God's Word has a power and authority that goes far beyond anything attached to men's words. When God said, "Let there be," there was. And God promised salvation. He reinforced that promise through the prophets. And when the time came for God to say, "Let there be salvation," the Word became flesh. The Word of promise was not only fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but it was Jesus Christ. And it was the same powerful Word that had created everything.<sup>12</sup>

The proper Word of the Gospel has God's power and authority. When a promise is made in the context of the Gospel, it is

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<sup>11</sup>Deut. 7:9; Ps. 31:5; Is. 49:7; 1 Cor. 1:9, 10:13;  
2 Thess. 3:3.

<sup>12</sup>John 1.1-5.

a sure and certain Word. There need be no doubt on the part of the believer. Christ is intimately involved whenever a Gospel promise is made. Robert Preus states, "The Gospel is a means of grace because it brings Christ Himself to those who hear it."<sup>13</sup>

These are not man's promises that are issued in the proclamation of the Gospel. They are not the promises of the preachers but of God. And these promises are to be proclaimed. It is this specific message which possesses the power. It is not the preacher who gives the message its power--the message has a power all its own through the will of God. Thus God uses His Word to bestow forgiveness and life. R. C. H. Lenski writes, "The entire Gospel and doctrine of salvation is the absolutely highest truth with which human souls may come in contact. In all the universe there is nothing lovelier than the love of God in Christ Jesus to us fallen sinners."<sup>14</sup> Every preacher should impress upon himself the fact that the Gospel he has been appointed to preach is "the absolutely highest truth." Every preacher needs to respect not only the Word of God in general, the Scriptures as a whole, but also for the Gospel in particular. He must not be satisfied just because he proclaimed a message that was based on a Scripture lesson. He should not be content with merely presenting the Word of God--

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<sup>13</sup>Robert Preus, The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1957; reprint, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 174.

<sup>14</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Sermon (Columbus, Ohio: The Lutheran Book Concern, n.d.), 68.



he should be consumed with the holy ambition to speak the greatest Word, the specific Gospel, the promises of divine grace and mercy.

The proclamation of the pure Gospel is the true basis for celebration in the Church. The issuing of the promises of God is the basis for every individual Christian to experience the peace of God. This is a valid peace. It is not based on self-righteousness or self-satisfaction, but is firmly rooted in the past activity of God and is united in hope with the return of Christ. The joy solicited by faith in the Gospel is simultaneously the joy of a promise made and of a promise fulfilled. Where faith is active, the line between issuing and fulfillment is imperceptible.

This twofold joy is evident in man's promises. For example, when a child is promised that the family will take a vacation to Walt Disney World, the very making of the promise will solicit excitement, happiness, and joy as long as the child trusts the giver of the promise. This anticipatory joy will eventually be supplanted by the excitement, happiness, and joy of actually being in Walt Disney World when the vacation promise is fulfilled.

In the proclamation of the Gospel promises God not only claims that He will forgive your sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, but He does forgive them. The promise of eternal life is not simply made, but fulfilled through faith. Forgiveness will not be reserved until the day of judgment--the process

will actually commence when faith accepts the promise. The process will culminate on the day of judgment, but until that day the penitent sinner is perpetually forgiven when he believes in the absolution. And eternal life does not begin at the moment of temporal death; rather it started at the moment of spiritual rebirth.

The Gospel, being so sure a Word of promise, is the true means by which God has decreed to deliver the benefits of His Son. It is sad that there should be anywhere in Christendom a person who does not take full hold of the Gospel promises but allows himself to be plagued with doubts and harassed by fears. Luther portrays a defiant faith in the Gospel when he writes in the Large Catechism:

If you are asked, 'What do you believe in the Second Article [of the Apostles' Creed], concerning Jesus Christ?' answer briefly, 'I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord.' What is it to 'become a Lord'? It means that he has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil.<sup>15</sup>

It is also sad that there are people who reject the true message of the Gospel; for even though it promises and delivers so very much, its work is not irresistible. Walther points out, "The promise is useless unless it is received by faith."<sup>16</sup> Faith is not taught as being a means of grace, but it is a means of receiving. Chemnitz writes, "For faith is, as it were, our hand with which we take, apprehend, and accept the

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<sup>15</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 414.

<sup>16</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 358.

benefits of Christ."<sup>17</sup> This passage from the Gospel according to John is cited: "But to all who received him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."<sup>18</sup>

It is necessary at this point to be cautious. Faith is not to be presented as a good work or as obedience. As usual, one must avoid the tendency to give man a portion of the glory and credit for his salvation. Walther calls faith, ". . . merely a passive instrument, like a hand into which one places a dollar."<sup>19</sup> An individual may reject the Gospel and thereby receive credit for his damnation. An individual may not, however, receive credit for his justification since it is God who has done all the work. The preacher must be on guard so that the illusion that man can produce faith on his own or believe without the Holy Spirit is never taught or insinuated. He may effectively proclaim, "Repent and believe;" but he must never assume that everyone in his congregation can segregate the work that man does and is able to do from what God does and alone is able to do.

It is common to refer to the rising and the setting of the sun. All educated people, however, know that the sun does not rise and set--it only looks that way from our perspective.

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<sup>17</sup>Martin Chemnitz, Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion, trans. Luther Poellot (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 75.

<sup>18</sup>John 1:12.

<sup>19</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 272.

This does not make us change our manner of speaking, for all the centuries that man has known that the sun is stable and that the earth is moving he still expresses himself based on the illusion. Nor is it bad until someone insists on teaching that the illusion is true while the facts are ignored.

In the same way (but so more important than astronomy), when the statement of Christ, "Repent and believe the gospel," is interpreted as meaning that men can do this on their own, the truth of the matter has been sacrificed to the illusion. It is not God's intention that the facts of the matter be ignored. Paul teaches, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) . . . ." <sup>20</sup> The term "dead" expresses the truth that we are unable to do anything on our own. A dead person cannot do anything out of initiative. A spiritually dead person cannot initiate spiritual life; but God "made us alive." In the same way Peter writes, "Through him [Christ] you have confidence in God . . . ." <sup>21</sup> And again, Paul states, ". . . No one can say 'Jesus is Lord!' except by the Holy Spirit." <sup>22</sup> Who then is the source of faith? Not man, but God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Therefore, Walther correctly says:

. . . the Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes

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<sup>20</sup>Eph 2.4-5.

<sup>21</sup>1 Peter 1:21.

<sup>22</sup>1 Cor. 12:3.

an appeal to believe in a manner as if a person could make himself believe or at least help toward that end, instead of preaching faith into a person's heart by laying the Gospel promises before him.<sup>23</sup>

Walther asserts that it is not an error for a preacher to demand that his hearers believe the Gospel. "The demand to believe is to be understood not as an order of the Law, but as an invitation of the Gospel . . . ." <sup>24</sup> Just as when I ask what time the sun will rise or set it is understood that the earth is the moving entity. When the demand to believe the Gospel is not issued with the proper understanding but is put forth in the context of deciding to be justified, it is a false teaching. To present matters in an orthodox fashion, it must be taught, as Walther explains, ". . . that . . . the Gospel, when demanding faith, offers and gives us faith in that very demand;" and, ". . . that it [the Gospel] does not at all reprove the sinner . . . but fills him with peace and joy in the Holy Ghost;" and, finally:

. . . the Gospel does not require anything good that man must furnish: not a good heart, not a good disposition, no improvement of his condition, no godliness, no love either of God or men. It issues no orders, but it changes man. It plants love into his heart and makes him capable of all good works. It demands nothing, but it gives all.  
[emphasis mine]<sup>25</sup>

This line of discussion leads to the fact that it is only through faith that one may appropriate all the gifts of God. It also points to the fact that faith is the work of the Holy

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<sup>23</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 260.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 15-16.

Spirit in us. His work is necessary since no man could believe on his own all the gracious things God has done for him in Jesus Christ. The means by which the Holy Spirit works faith and offers grace is the Gospel present in Word and Sacraments. When the Gospel is proclaimed faithfully and not recklessly, the preacher may say with Paul, ". . . my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."<sup>26</sup>

Anything else that a person may say when proclaiming the Gospel must serve the Gospel. The Law is used to prepare people for the Gospel, and also to inform them regarding God's will so that they, who have been changed by the Gospel, may live fruitful lives. All illustrations and analogies and creative dynamics must work toward presenting the Gospel and not detracting from it. All true power (for saving men) is contained in the message itself. The supreme task of any minister is to present and proclaim the Gospel in a relevant fashion (not by changing the content of the Gospel, which is always relevant) so that the hearers may be justified by grace through faith. As John H. C. Fritz reminds us, "The salvation of man is the one purpose of all Christian preaching."<sup>27</sup>

Since our supreme purpose in preaching is to save men,

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<sup>26</sup>1 Cor. 2:4-5.

<sup>27</sup>John H. C. Fritz, The Essentials of Preaching (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1948), 63.

let it be reiterated that the only message which can fulfill that purpose is the Gospel. As it is stated in the Apology, "The proclamation of the Gospel produces faith in those who accept it. . . . This is how the name of the Lord becomes great among the nations."<sup>28</sup> And so, all the glory and honor and praise must be given to God.

This purpose and effect of preaching is essential to comprehending our relationship to Christ as our Redeemer. Peter Brunner writes:

There is, indeed, an 'indissoluble interrelation' [quoting Luther] of the redemptive event and the apostolic proclamation of this event. In the Word of the cross, the cross-event itself reaches out to man in the power of its eschatological freedom and presence. In the Word of reconciliation, the reconciliation takes place by virtue of the power of what took place on the cross.<sup>29</sup>

This means that the proclamation of the Gospel receives its power from the actual sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and that the sacrifice is effective through the proclamation of the Gospel. These are weighty considerations which no preacher should neglect lest he wander from the pure Word of the cross and give his listeners the mere logic of men.

The proclamation of the Gospel is absolution. It offers the specific forgiveness (the only true forgiveness) which Christ merited on Calvary and bestows on man the righteousness of our Lord. This is the power of God at work through men.

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<sup>28</sup>Tappert, The Book of Concord, 255.

<sup>29</sup>Peter Brunner, Worship in the Name of Jesus, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 149.

When a minister offers forgiveness conditionally, then it is not the forgiveness of Christ--since Christ has done all that was necessary. When a minister offers forgiveness shrouded in and buried under human reasoning, then it is not the forgiveness of Christ--since Christ offers His absolution freely and not based on man's logical system of reward and punishment. Chemnitz states, ". . . absolution is nothing else than the proclamation of the Gospel itself, announcing the forgiveness of sins gratis because of Christ, generally, to all who repent and believe the Gospel."<sup>30</sup>

Those who do not proclaim the Gospel and offer this true absolution leave Christ stranded on Calvary. It is a regrettable, but honest observation that sermons are preached in our Synod that have forgotten this divine message and forsaken this divine power. This is not a modern phenomenon. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel."<sup>31</sup>

Luther corrected prominent and longstanding abuses when he taught, ". . . the forgiveness of guilt, the heavenly indulgence, is granted to no one on account of the worthiness of his contrition over his sins, nor on account of his works of satisfaction, but only on account of his faith in the promise of

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<sup>30</sup>Martin Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent: Part II, trans. Fred Kramer (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 622.

<sup>31</sup>Gal. 1:6.



God."<sup>32</sup> And Walther lamented in regard to his day and age, "But few, very few, there are even among Lutherans, who truly believe in absolution. That is the curse of false teaching. By incorrect preaching men are deprived of their most precious treasure."<sup>33</sup>

This is testimony to how men have resisted the Gospel. Preaching the Gospel should be an intimate encounter between God and His people, but in far too many instances Christ is never truly introduced to the listeners. The fortunate fact that His absolution is offered wherever and whenever the Gospel is communicated does not excuse its absence in the regular delivery of sermons. It is in this setting that the Gospel of Christ can be proclaimed in conjunction with the full testimony of God. Here the most detailed application of the Gospel can be made and the analogies of Scripture and Faith employed. The particular needs that a congregation may have can be addressed directly with the Law and Gospel through the conscientious efforts of their minister. And when all is said and done, when the Gospel has been proclaimed and the absolution has been declared, Christ has spoken directly to His people.

Luther states, ". . . one should teach that men make confession to Christ, and Christ absolves through the mouth of the

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<sup>32</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann, Vol. 35, Word and Sacrament I: The Sacrament of Penance, 1959, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 12.

<sup>33</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 173.

minister."<sup>34</sup> This is true of private confession/absolution and the absolution of the Gospel in preaching. The authority of God is behind this message. Christ is brought directly to the people. The Holy Spirit is present with the message, doing His work and giving the sermon life. The Gospel is all this by the will and grace of God.

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<sup>34</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, vol. 54, Table Talk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 394.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PROPER PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

"Among the various functions and official acts of a servant of the Church," asserts C. F. W. Walther, "the most important of all, my friends, is preaching."<sup>1</sup> An assessment of Martin Luther's career indicates that among the many things he accomplished, re-establishing Christ's Gospel as the central point of all teaching and re-establishing preaching as the chief means of proclaiming that Gospel were primary. In this way, the apostolic foundation of the Christian Church was recognized and the authority of Christ and the merits of Christ were honored.

Wilhelm Loehe emphasized that ". . . among the means which the church uses to save souls, preaching stands first. It is the means by which those are called who stand off, and those who have been called are rendered steadfast in their calling and election."<sup>2</sup> There is no credible reason for abandoning the concerns of the Reformation. The Gospel must

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<sup>1</sup>C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 247.

<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm Loehe, Three Books Concerning the Church, trans. Edward T. Horn (Reading, Pennsylvania: Pilger Publishing Co., 1908), 181, quoted in Philip H. Pfatteicher, Festivals and Commemorations: Handbook to the Calendar in Lutheran Book of Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 63.

remain the central point of all teaching and the primary means of communicating that Gospel must be preaching.

It has been stated that the proper preaching of the Gospel is no easy task. The recognition of that fact is perhaps the first step in correcting any undesirable tendencies in our preaching. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that preaching the Gospel is a challenge. The preacher who wishes to be faithful to his calling must be willing to face that challenge. James alludes to the difficulties and the seriousness of the task when he writes, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness."<sup>3</sup>

This should not discourage those who have been called to teach. It should, however, encourage them to accept all the responsibilities involved. Having recognized that their joyous task is not an easy task, they must also recognize their dependency upon God for the power to fulfill their calling faithfully. This is not an argument against the efficacy of the Gospel spoken by faithless men. The fact that the Gospel spoken by faithless men would still be viable as a means of grace demonstrates that it is not man's power, but God's. What is at issue here are the ministers who believe in the doctrines of the Church, but who through inflated egos delude themselves into thinking that God is dependent on them and/or anything they say is of utmost importance. It is still true that whenever

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<sup>3</sup> James 3:1. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version.

such people preach the Gospel, it is the Gospel; but what is also true is that such preachers tend to deviate from the prescribed message to present their own opinions and ideas. It is a paradox that these men, who are conceited, strive so much to give the impression that they are humble. On the other hand, those who are humbled and most dependent on God for their power and strength will be the preachers who speak with true confidence and authority.

Luther once commented to a guest at his dinner table, "When you are to preach, speak with God and say, 'Dear Lord God, I wish to preach in thine honor. I wish to speak about thee, glorify thee, praise thy name. Although I can't do this well of myself, I pray that thou mayest make it good.'"<sup>4</sup> This is sound homiletical advice and would benefit all who use it in the preparation of every sermon. It indicates that the preacher is to humble himself before God and to seek His honor alone. It advises that the preacher pray to God and petition Him for divine strength in this endeavor, for it is the divine aid alone which can effectively destroy a man's haughty spirit and yet lift him up as a spokesman and instrument of grace.

The individual who has humbled himself before God and prayed for His power is on the way to being an effective messenger of the Gospel. The next general step would be to ask the question, "What do I say? What do I preach?" The answer,

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<sup>4</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, vol. 54, Table Talk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 157-158.

given through the Apostle, is, "Preach the word."<sup>5</sup>

As was indicated before (page 22), this command calls for the preaching of the total Word, Law and Gospel. To add to what has already been stated, however, it is now appropriate to emphasize that one must remain loyal to the revealed Word. This includes being loyal to Christ, the Word made flesh, and to the Scriptures. It means that nothing is to be proclaimed as the Word of God which is not, in fact, the Word of God. It means that we make no new laws and present no contrary gospels. All the points that are made while properly proclaiming the Word must be rooted in the Word. In preparing the sermon, the preacher would do well to listen to Luther's advice to all Christians, "Beloved, put it on the scales and weigh it according to God's Word;"<sup>6</sup> and to preachers specifically, ". . . a preacher conducts the household of God by virtue and on the strength of his commission and office, and he dare not say anything different from what God says and commands."<sup>7</sup>

The preacher's situation as a messenger is such that he, in order to be faithful to his calling, is bound to a specific message, that is, the Gospel. At the same time, however, it is not a message that has been prepared for him to simply read. He is to prepare the message himself. He is to employ his

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<sup>5</sup>2 Tim. 4:2.

<sup>6</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, General ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 51, Sermons I, ed. & trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 340.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 305.

personality and abilities in preparing and proclaiming the Word without allowing them to interfere with the Word. Therefore, in one sense it is proper for the preacher to call the sermon "his message"; while it is most proper to refer to it as "the message of God."

Richard Caemmerer writes:

If a sermon is to be 'preaching' in the Christian sense, and to be a part of the great tradition of Christian preaching, it will set forth a message from the Bible. This is a purpose of the Bible, to direct the preaching and teaching of the Holy Christian Church through the ages.<sup>8</sup>

To execute the proper proclamation of the Gospel (specifically), there must be proper proclamation of the Word (in general). This is the primary rule of preaching. All other homiletical directives and all good intentions must be tested by this heavenly edict: "Preach the word." It is also the first goal of preaching.

The contemporary concern to preach a sermon textually has created considerable trouble for many preachers. It is due, admittedly, to a misunderstanding of what textual preaching really is. The rule and goal of preaching must be to "preach the word." Textual preaching is a means to follow that rule and accomplish that goal. In discussions with many pastors it became evident that preaching textually has become their goal. "Preach the text" is not synonymous with "preach the word." Though in some instances it would not matter if they were

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<sup>8</sup>Richard Caemmerer, Preaching for the Church (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 67.

regarded as synonymous (whenever the text happened to contain both Law and Gospel), it causes a considerable amount of difficulty when the text contains only the Gospel and it does an insurmountable amount of damage when the text contains the Law alone. If one preaches "textually" and yet does not preach the Gospel, he has failed to deliver the message for which he was called. Caemmerer makes this clear, "The preacher wants to preach Christ; if the text does not speak of the redemption, this is no warrant for the preacher to omit it."<sup>9</sup> It does no one any good if the preacher is loyal to the specific text but disloyal to the Word, Jesus Christ.

Every preacher must remember as he prepares and delivers the sermon that he is to announce promises in the name of God. These are not to be the preacher's own promises, nor are they to be the conditional promises of the Law; rather, they are to herald only the sweet Gospel promises which are offered through the work and merits of Jesus Christ. The conditions of the promises of the Law have been fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He passes these promises on to His people with no conditions. He freely offers the gift of the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, strengthening and preservation of faith, et cetera. These are the matters, clearly articulated as being offered through the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, which are to dominate the proclamation of the Gospel. Walther says, "Without telling them [the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 69.



congregation] how to attain to faith in Christ, your hearers will be spiritually starved to death if you do not allow the Gospel to predominate in your preaching."<sup>10</sup>

The preaching of the Word would never exclude the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the focal point of the Scriptures. If the Gospel were not presented, the heart of God's message would be removed. The Gospel is the word of life.<sup>11</sup> Without it, there is no message of life. Textual and so called "biblical" preaching are useless devices for proclaiming the Word of God if they fail to understand the full purpose of God's revelation--to bring salvation to men. If in place of the Gospel promises the threatenings of the Law are allowed to dominate and overwhelm, we have denied the ultimate purpose of the Law (to lead to the proclamation of the Gospel) and the purpose of the Word. Alton Wedel states:

The message of the holy Book is Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection--the Mighty Word: Power and Purpose of Preaching. It is the death and resurrection of our Lord that snaps the padlock, opens Holy Scripture, and cracks the shell of human hearts. . . . It is the death and resurrection of our Lord that form and shape the lens through which we read the Scriptures and through which the light of truth breaks in upon our hearts. 'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?'<sup>12</sup>

The preacher who does not proclaim the Gospel cannot

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<sup>10</sup> Walther, Law and Gospel, 406.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 1:1-3.

<sup>12</sup> Alton Wedel, The Mighty Word: Power and Purpose of Preaching, The Preacher's Workshop Series (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 15.

preach the Word of God. It is not possible. If God had ever intended for His message to be void of the Gospel, He would never have promised a Savior; Christ would never have been born under the Law; He would have permitted the cup to pass from Christ; He would not have raised the Son to life; Christ would not have commissioned the Apostles or instituted the Sacraments; He would not send the Holy Spirit to comfort and teach us all things; He would not have established His Church on earth. But since He has done and accomplished all these gracious things, it is of the utmost importance that His gracious activity be published throughout the world.

The preacher must not isolate a section of the Word of God. If one is dealing with a text which is distinctively Law, one cannot leave out the Gospel (and vice versa). The preacher must be faithful to the material and formal principles and he must apply the analogies of Scripture and Faith. In this way the entire revelation of God can be understood and proclaimed. A sermon is not salutary if it is not faithful to the goal of genuinely preaching the Word.

Since the Gospel is absolution, the message is not of God if the terrified sinner cannot find relief. Walther says, ". . . preaching the Gospel means nothing else than telling men that they have been reconciled, perfectly reconciled, with God by Christ."<sup>13</sup> The proper proclamation of the Gospel brings this fact home repeatedly and without interruption as it

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<sup>13</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 391.

recognizes the cyclical aspect of lives lived simultaneously as saints and sinners. In English, this circular pathway is emphasized by the use of the prefix "re" ("again," "anew"). We preach reconciliation, redemption, recreation, restoration, repentance, regeneration, rebirth, et cetera. The major emphases of proper Gospel proclamation include: confession/absolution, birth to death to life, damnation to salvation, despair to joy, et cetera. The liturgical character of our Synod adds historical understanding to this presentation of the Gospel as we concentrate on the various events in the life of our Lord and on the various doctrines He has bequeathed to us. The minister who fears that the message of God will become boring or overexposed does not understand the power of the Gospel. What true lover ever fails to say "I love you," again and again? What good parent ceases to give over and over again the necessities of daily living? What worthwhile shepherd would ever stop feeding his sheep?

The message of the Gospel is something that must be said again and again. The preacher has the joyous task of reiterating "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit."<sup>14</sup> But in doing this he does not only repeat words. Since the Gospel is a means of grace, by repeating the message of the Gospel he is repeatedly bearing the gifts of God.

But the proper proclamation of the Gospel does not

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<sup>14</sup><sub>2</sub> Cor. 13:14.

repeat these things in such a manner as if God distributed His grace piecemeal. Walther strongly addresses this point:

This is what your hearers must learn, viz., that they are either spiritually dead or spiritually alive, either converted or unconverted, either under the wrath of God or in a state of grace, either Christians or unchristians, either asleep in sin or quickened unto a new life in God, subjects in either the devil's or God's kingdom. . . . Make plain to your hearers in all your sermons that there are but two goals at the end of this life--heaven and hell.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, besides preaching repentance, restitution, remission of sins, and so forth, one must present the absolute power of Jesus Christ and the truth He proclaimed, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."<sup>16</sup> G. K. Chesterton's stimulating comments on the superior symbolism of the cross over and against that of the circle address this ultimate truth: "Because it [the cross] has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers."<sup>17</sup>

It is man's sinfulness, the nature of the old Adam, which necessitates the constant repentance followed by the reassurance through absolution. It is because of the ongoing struggle between the new man and the old man that Christians need to

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<sup>15</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 319.

<sup>16</sup>John 10:27-28.

<sup>17</sup>G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1908; Image Books Edition, 1959), 28-29.

be reminded and edified. Man's imperfection dictates that he be convinced again and again that he is a sinner; and just as frequently (for those who are convinced) be told that God forgives and forgets his sins through the reconciliation of Jesus Christ.

At the same time that the proper proclamation of the Gospel enforces this temporal cyclical pattern imposed by man's imperfection, it also declares in no uncertain terms the infinite love and perfect work of Jesus Christ which assures us that the victory has been won though battles continue to rage. That conflict at the center of the cross, where God's justice was satisfied through the sacrifice of the Son, truly shatters the cycles. Through Jesus Christ and Him alone can the Gospel be properly preached. For it was He, "who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."<sup>18</sup> In the name of Jesus Christ and through the telling of His Good News, the preacher not only makes and offers the gracious promises of God, but in that same preaching they are fulfilled.

It is also a proper use of the Gospel when the preacher does not neglect the Sacraments but reinforces God's involvement in the life of the Christian by reminding them of the baptismal covenant He established with them and urging the proper use of the Sacrament of the Altar. The sermons of Luther and Walther are resplendent with proclamatory

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<sup>18</sup><sub>1</sub> Tim. 1:10.

commentary on the Sacraments.

It is important that the means of grace (as a topic) be preached about on occasion in order to strengthen faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and all matters pertaining to the Gospel. It must be made clear that Word and Sacraments are God's proper work among us. It must be stated that through Christ the Word of absolution is a sure word of forgiveness. The efficacy of Baptism and the divine power of the Sacrament of Altar must be declared. The proclamation of the Word in formal preaching and informal consolation (priesthood of all believers and pastoral care) must be taught as the work of God Himself. These are things that can ultimately be grasped by faith alone. As Luther reminds us, "It does no good to preach to reason: no matter how much one preaches to it, no matter how many prophets God sends to it, everything that is against reason must be persecuted and killed."<sup>19</sup>

Again, the preacher's role as messenger is to be underscored. The preacher is not an apologist. It is not his job, when preaching, to defend the faith or to prove any of its doctrines. "Sermons are not arguments," R. C. H. Lenski says. "To preach is not to argue, but to testify. . . . By its very nature it is either true or false."<sup>20</sup> The preacher heralds.

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<sup>19</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, vol. 52, Sermons II, trans. John G. Kunstmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 89.

<sup>20</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Sermon (Columbus, Ohio: The Lutheran Book Concern, n.d.), 53.

He proclaims. There may be other settings in which he must gird himself for verbal battle--but the sermon is the time to speak the facts about sin and to sound the cry of victory in and through Christ. This is the proper way to preach the Gospel. This is how one ministers with the Gospel.

It is not infrequent that a preacher wishes to argue theological points. He can do this, but not when he is preaching. This is not to say that while proclaiming the Gospel the preacher cannot indicate the prominent errors of false gospels. This should not be done in order to elevate the true Gospel, but by elevating the true Gospel. The errors of the unorthodox can be exposed by the light of the Gospel to protect the congregation from these errors. (For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses and Unification Church are exceptionally active in the neighborhood of the congregation I am serving. In addition, the "health" and "wealth" television preachers are appealing to many of the members who are lower middle class. As part of my pastoral duties and out of concern for the congregation, I will contrast the falsehoods of these cults with the truth of the Gospel. Luther calls this aspect of preaching "salting."<sup>21</sup>) It is a legitimate concern, however, that the focus of preaching, the Gospel proper, not be obscured by an overabundance of protectiveness which can swiftly become "witch-hunting."

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<sup>21</sup>Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 21, The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 54-60.

The first goal is to preach the Word. The ultimate goal is to bring men to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. This ultimate goal is the appropriation of all the benefits of Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel. In addition to this, however, and a part of the proper proclamation of the Gospel, is the application to our lives. Here again are the Gospel admonitions and imperatives. The presentation of the application, Lenski maintains, is that, ". . . by which the preacher stirs us up to exercise our love and Christian virtues, and to get rid of our flesh, our worldliness, our ungodliness of life."<sup>22</sup> It is, in short, the preacher's contribution to the continual process of sanctification.

Lenski warns, "Absolutely always homiletical Appropriation outranks homiletical Application. Absolutely always homiletical Application rests on homiletical Appropriation. First preach the Christ for us, then preach the Christ in us."<sup>23</sup> There is, as has been indicated before, a strong tendency among preachers to place the application first and thereby produce moralistic sermons in which Christ's main duty is to be chief example. While avoiding such a trend, one could hardly preach the Word and not present these commands and guidelines which no longer frighten us (as they do in the second use of the Law) but aid us in our desire to live as the redeemed people of God.

The situation is different from that encountered in

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<sup>22</sup>Lenski, The Sermon, 119.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.



justification. Now man can, and should, cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Now man offers something to God (with God's help) whereas in the process of justification God offered to him (with no help or inherent worthiness on the part of the man).

In theological order, initially there is the second use of the Law, followed by the proclamation of the Gospel, and finally there is the application of the Word to the Christian life (third use of the Law). This progression is proper, but it must not be deduced that the application is the ultimate goal of preaching. The Gospel, being the means of grace and the climax of God's message, is central, pivotal, and ultimate. Therefore, even when the sermon text lends itself entirely to homiletical application, the preacher must not forfeit the proclamation of justification by grace through faith. The specific Gospel is never to be taken for granted. It is never to be inferred. It must never be placed in a subservient role.

The proper proclamation of the Gospel never loses sight of the fact that the Gospel is the distinguishing characteristic of our faith. On this point Walther wrote, "All religions contain portions of the Law. . . . But of the Gospel not a particle is found anywhere except in the Christian religion."<sup>24</sup> While all other religions struggle on the basis of works and personal merits, we have the true and final Word from God which grants us freedom through the blood of Jesus Christ. While many other religions have ceremonial washings and other

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<sup>24</sup>Walther, Law and Gospel, 8.

symbolic acts, only the Christian faith has Sacraments which fulfill all that they signify and promise.

Since the Gospel is the means by which God lifts us up and brings the benefits of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection to us; and since all preachers of the Christian faith are called to minister with the Gospel; and since the Gospel brings the justification which permits us to do good works and glorify the Father in heaven; and since the Gospel is the distinguishing mark of our faith and the only true mark of the visible Christian Church; then the proper proclamation of the Word of God must have as its heart and life the Good News of God's love active in Jesus Christ. Any message which does not bear this Gospel cannot function as a means of grace.

As Luther admonishes:

Therefore one must preach about Jesus Christ that He died and rose from the dead, and why He died and rose again, in order that people may come to faith through such preaching and be saved through faith. This is what it means to preach the genuine Gospel. Preaching of another kind is not the Gospel, no matter who does it.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 30, The Catholic Epistles: Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 10.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, "As a witness to Christ, the sermon is a struggle with demons. Every sermon must overcome Satan. . . . It happens only through the proclamation of the One who has trodden upon the head of the devil."<sup>1</sup> Every preacher must be cognizant that it is not only in the actual proclamation of Christ that one wrestles with demons; the struggle begins much earlier than that. It begins with all the temptations to postpone and neglect and distort the message of God. The demons want their say in how we plan our sermons. They are not at all opposed to a sermon which moralizes. They are delighted with sermons which deal with social issues, political topics, and the philosophical observations of man. They will support any preacher who is willing to preach himself. These are the types of sermons the demons can hear and enjoy without taking offense. What they cannot tolerate is the Gospel.

How does one explain the phenomenon of well-educated preachers who fail to proclaim the vital element of God's Word? How is that ministers in the LC-MS (myself included), who know

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<sup>1</sup>Clyde E. Fant, Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1975), 133.

that the Gospel is a means of divine grace, who are called to preach that Gospel, and who have subscribed to the formal and material principles of the Lutheran Church (as well as the Confessions in total) can ever allow the Gospel to be anything but dominant? The answer may be found in the activity of Satan, worldliness, and each preacher's own sinful nature.

The implication of this study is not that every minister of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod fails his calling to preach the Gospel. But every criticism and every illustration contained in these chapters have been observed and are true. There are enough of us who fail in general, and many more who fail on occasion, to justify the concern over the condition of preaching in our Church. We must turn away from all tendencies to teach falsely and make a conscientious return to the proclamation of the Gospel. And this should not be an occasional effort. The preparation for every sermon should begin by scattering the demons in the name of Jesus Christ. Then we must suppress our own opinions and ideas and methods that are not in concert with the message of God. Every sermon needs to be the product of rededication to our calling as ministers of the Gospel and servants of the Lord Jesus Christ and His people.

When preaching, there are numerous dynamics that are (or at least should be) at work. As a public proclamation there is to be genuine concern over the style of the text and the manner of delivery. One cannot preach with language that is too technical and hope to reach the average listener. The preacher

must prepare his sermon with an understanding that it will be presented orally. And when it comes time to deliver this message, there is a veritable three-ring circus of physical and verbal dynamics with which to be concerned: poise, well-timed gestures, facial expression, eye contact, rate, pacing and timing of key phrases, projection, and the verbal emphasis of important words and thoughts through control of volume, pitch, tone, and dramatic underscoring. But the best preparation and the most eloquent and forceful delivery will never be able to rescue a terrified sinner from eternal damnation and genuinely lift the burden of his guilt if the message is devoid of the dynamic of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the unique power that should earmark all Christian proclamation. Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit will move among the listeners. He will convert, console, and edify. The Gospel is that Word of which the Lord says, ". . . it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the absolute preoccupation of every preacher and every sermon should be to proclaim the Gospel. No other homiletical rule can usurp this primary regulation. All other homiletical rules and devices must support the fulfillment of that chief concern. The preacher who is loyal to his calling will find this to be no easy accomplishment. He will discover

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<sup>2</sup>Is. 55:11. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version.

that preaching faithfully does not only involve wrestling with demons, the world, and himself; he must also wrestle with God. In this encounter, one seeks defeat. Having been thus defeated, humbled, and blessed, he can limp to his podium and christen it "Peniel." Because of Christ's presence in the Gospel, the preacher and the congregation can say, "We have seen God face to face, and yet our lives are preserved."<sup>3</sup>

When the Gospel is present, then the message is God's. With that understanding, the preacher can fulfill his task. Now he is ready to take the text for the sermon and preach the Word. Now he can begin the frequently arduous job of analyzing the text, distinguishing the Law and Gospel, and applying the Word to the particular and proper needs of the congregation. Now he is in the position to make use of all the homiletical rules and mechanics to support his singular work of proclaiming the Gospel.

Preaching in this manner not only talks about the grace of God in Christ, but it becomes a means of bringing that grace. It does not only talk about forgiveness; it actually forgives. It does not simply promise life eternal; it gives life eternal. And all this because God is active in that Gospel. Preaching in this manner carries God's authority. The preacher can be confident of this and conclude, "Thus saith the Lord."

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<sup>3</sup>Gen. 32:22-31.

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